

Spring 2019

When We've Left the Table

Lauren Rose Clark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clark, L.(2019). *When We've Left the Table*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/5223>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

When We've Left the Table

by

Lauren Rose Clark

Bachelor of Arts
Winthrop University, 2014

Master of Arts
Auburn University, 2016

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2019

Accepted by:

Nikky Finney, Director of Thesis

James Barilla, Reader

Liz Countryman, Reader

Andrew Graciano, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Lauren Rose Clark, 2019
All Rights Reserved.

Acknowledgements

The Equalizer for publishing three of the “Assisted Living” sonnets and *PANK!* for publishing “Minister of Hearts” and “Notes on Becoming.”

Members of the University of South Carolina faculty, especially Sam Amadon, Liz Countryman, Fred Dings, and Nikky Finney.

My thesis director, Nikky Finney, for her patience, direction, and time.

My thesis committee readers, James Barilla, Liz Countryman, and Andrew Graciano, for their time and attention to my work.

My cohort, Carlos Gomez Marques, Catherine Ntube, and Joy Priest, for their poetics and solidarity.

Abstract

When We've Left the Table is a collection of poems that explores personal identity as it relates to family and upbringing, as well as grief in its various forms.

Preface

When We've Left the Table is a reckoning of the self. Through the process of disappearing and the insistence to reappear, the speaker in these poems deals with grief as fluid, as constant in its leaving and arrival in both the relationship to the grandmother fading from Alzheimer's and the heartbreak in both losing family and a romantic partner. These poems are a representation of the different causes of grief and the different ways one can grieve, whether through memory, image, or place.

My poetics have never been more present in a body of work than this collection. The practice of writing and organizing these poems is one that taught me patience through work and one that allowed my poetic voice to emerge. The construction of the poems led me to the discovery of my craft and the discovery of myself, and I believe that to be present in the poems here. The questioning, contemplative speaker and the surrealist and disjointed images throughout the manuscript have taught me that there is no boundary between what I need to say and what I've said on the page.

As the speaker works through the discovery of her sexuality and personal identity, through her grief and resilience, she reappears as whole, marking herself as present and having been present all along. I see this manuscript as ultimately presenting what it means to arrive at the table as oneself, how to live with loss there, and what it takes to leave.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Preface	v
Dog, Deer, Rabbit	1
I'm Burning Things I Know I'll Want Tomorrow	3
sleep season	5
Digging	6
Notes on Becoming	7
A Bright Distance	10
The Let Down	11
The Wake Up	13
Half-Light	15
When We've Left the Table	16
Second Thoughts on Existence	17
Minister of Hearts	19
Assisted Living	24

Somewhere there is a tree or somewhere there.....	25
There's some kind of button everywhere to	26
Some other woman who's losing her mind.....	27
He's eighty-seven, six-feet tall and too young.....	28
The last time I saw her, the last time I'll.....	29
We see a woman in the hallway on.....	30
There are alarms if you try to escape	31
My mother never uses the word <i>if</i>	32
Take me to the backyard and assist me.....	33
My grandmother's dipped in a tub by a woman whose	34
A woman I worked with told me I should	35
The heart is perfect, beats when spoken to,	36
Nanny's picked up in the same clothes she wore	37
I wrote a poem this morning, poached it.....	38
To Be Good.....	39
What Looks Like Losing It but Is Really Getting By	40
Body Economy.....	42
The Elbow Room	43
Happy Hour.....	44

Body Economy.....	46
Gallery.....	47
Muscle Memory	48
To, From	49
Impressionism	50
Self Portrait as a Secret	52
Notes	53

“We find out the heart only by dismantling what the heart knows.”

-Jack Gilbert, *The Great Fires*

“She was in my brain every second.
My brain was enormous with her.”

-Martha Rhodes, *Mother Quiet*

Dog, Deer, Rabbit

The doctor asks when he forgets the most,
what time of day and what kinds of things,

and she asks him to name as many
animals as he can in one minute, it's harder

than it might seem when he doesn't
know where he is when the room is cold

and his bones are cold and he's not even sure
why he's here and he remembers first

that he had a dog, small and gray and gone
something he cared for something he fed

in the early morning and so he says that, *dog*
and the doctor says *good* and he feels himself

caged in this question, caged in a number like
eighty-seven, so many birthdays to remember

lately old faces always popping up to tell him
that they're his, children, grandchildren, great-

grandchildren he can't see himself in and
the doctor looks at him with patience, with

the question on her tongue and he remembers
the deer in his backyard every morning, their

white tail-lights beaming through the fog
their pressed green beds he'd mow over

in the afternoon and *deer* he says and dear
god when is the minute over – the truth is

the average person should be able to name
at least fourteen animals in one minute and

the time is running out too quickly
and he should try to name another soon,

and maybe he's seen a rabbit lately or it's
what he becomes in a dream some nights or

he had a rabbit on the farm he grew up on so
rabbit slips out before the minute arrives and

the animals have all been counted and the three
are left running in his ears *dog deer*

rabbit and there's still more I could ask
his mind now *do you know who this is do you*

know who I am is there anything familiar here
at all

I'm Burning Things I Know I'll Want Tomorrow

My fridge is full of pickle jars and other things past
their expiration. The upstairs neighbors still stomp

their homecoming any hour of the night, and still
it reminds me of you for no particular reason; maybe

it's our shared weight for words, maybe it's the way
we noticed things differently from each other – subtle herbs,

eyes blinking on the television, the couch cushion
that's softer than the others. This is not a love poem for you, this

is an asking. I'm getting older now, everyone
is getting older. I set a bonfire in my head

every night. Maybe for attention, smoke, maybe
I've been a fool for far too long. I can only

be responsible for what's left after the burning –
a chef's knife with a melted handle, the charred

cover of a book whose title I can't make out, a scorched
pair of earrings you gave me. But the things I want to burn

are so ethereal. The things I want gone will never leave.
I wake to licks of ash around my ankles; I wake

wanting everything back. I have such a longing
to be good, want so much for my past optimism,

that joy. Sometimes I find it in the lamplight of the
midnight desk, in the carrot scraps on the kitchen floor.

There is so much to burn and burn for. I am nothing if not
something physical, animal, flammable. This is to say

I'm to blame. This is to say I've not known the heat
of anything before it all went up. Will you let me

find that point at the very center of you
again. Will you let me love you just there.

sleep season

comes the night you said you remembered someone with my name but
her face doesn't match the moon of mine, my double-crater eyes that

hang low with fatigue. we all tire of the sudden excitement, your
finally finishing a meal or your asking for water. i'd ask if you've

had a good day, another one made up of coffee and observation. i'd ask
if you're okay here, in your room where everything's still, but it's too late

for any kind of babble. i'm watching you from across the room tonight,
nearly everyone else is sleeping, their tvs still haunting the halls with sound

and half-light, the ac humming through the window. i'm awake enough
to hear your rattle-chest, your head's soft knock against the chair

you live in now. i want to know the comfort of that chair, your
weight in it, how familiar your body is to its relief, as familiar as i am

to loving a disappearing thing.

Digging

after Seamus Heaney

It's too hot for any kind of clothing and
I join my grandfather in the front yard,

dig small holes in speckled dirt
for petunias, monkey grass. I am eight and

shirtless as he is, sunblind and sweating over
flowers and pulled weeds, how

separate they're thought to be, as if dandelions
don't have a stem, a face that reaches upward. I

am plucked from the ground
when he notices my bare back hunched

over the rows, thrown inside and dressed,
shrouded in a shirt I grew to hate.

Something happens when a weed is
cut off at the knees, it finds some other

place to grow and show its face,
turn to a little white head of hair

like the ones we couldn't burst with a breath
for fear of spreading out of our control.

My grandfather and I, digging. Throwing
seeds and straw over patches

where grass refused to grow, so much
prune and cover, trimming wild edges

along the sidewalk.

Notes on Becoming

I've known who I was for a long time – stiff jeans, small yellow work boots, nothing voluntarily girly. I remember growing up and going to work with my father, a carpenter, on his jobsites across the county. I'd learn to measure, to cut wood for baseboards, to build a kitchen out of an empty room.



My father taught me how to build something well. He knows how to put two and two together, when to hammer and nail, when to wait. He's taken to growing things now that he's older. He raised me like the tomatoes he tends to now – watched me take a form and a color without a rush.



I remember my fifth birthday the most clearly. My own black tool belt, small hammer, tiny tape measure I'd slide across my bedroom floor, see how many of myself I could fit lying down, how much room in the closet to hide while the dresses I hated hung above me like the slim, girlish bodies I would never have.



My mother never forced anything, any dress on me. We were both quiet about the body, mine, its difference in want and carry.



What's subtle was my grandfather's side-eyed looks whenever I acted outside of my girl-boundaries. What's not subtle was my grandmother always tugging on my clothes to see if just a pull or synch would make them fit better around my boy-frame.



When I was younger and knew God to be a mostly hating thing, I learned to pray for myself. I prayed to not like other girls, to not like boy clothes. I thought what I was given was unfair – some kind of mistake. I became a little hating thing.

I outgrew God among other things that grip; Easter dresses, tool belts, etc. I left people I thought would leave me, too. Some mistakes were made along the way.



My father knew who I was for a while. I've wondered why he didn't tell me; point out my wide strut along the rebar, my hands deep in the work of men. I've learned it's important to let someone figure themselves out, even if it risks letting them walk away. My father knows this, too.



My father has loved me my whole life. *That's my boy*, he'd say, if I did something boyish. I wished my chest would stop growing until it did. I longed for a balance of muscle and grace – I still do.



Once, I lifted something heavy in front of a group of men. A man said to my father, *you've got good stock in that one*. My father watched me shrink at this praise meant for boys.



Years ago, my father said, *if you find love, who cares what package it comes in*. My father has loved me my whole life.



When I came out to my mother, I was on the phone with her for three hours before I could say it. I feared the world would shift in the wrong direction. I feared my body might split in two down the center. Neither happened. My mother only has patience for her children. My mother doesn't care who I love. My mother never says anything explicitly.



I've taken stock of my own body on occasion, how my shoulders and hips found balance in their width, their disregard for my feeling of displacement, their insistence that I stay within the boundaries of myself, and that's enough. Sometimes I miss the way the tool belt seemed to hold me together.



My shoulders are my father's shoulders my toes are my father's toes my hands are my father's hands my feet are my father's feet my fingers are my father's fingers my humor is my father's humor my silence is my mother's silence this body is my own.



Once, a lover told me she liked my genders, declared me multiple, gave me permission to be who I am.



Thanks to lovers, thanks to wide shoulders, thanks to fathers, thanks to closets, thanks to building, thanks to mothers, thanks to tools.



My father feels a deep relation to the elephant, its memory. My father lost his mother long before she died; her brain lost its capacity to remember even the people she'd made. Elephants recognize even the bones of loved ones; they mourn over what remains of them. It is so important to be recognized. My father saw me long before I saw myself.



When I feel like someone's trying to figure me out I have an instinct to hide, even still. I imagine the drag queen feels the gravity of the closet pull her once in a while. There is comfort in control; there is control in being who you are.



I like the sounds of a construction site, the sanding, the hammering, the noises my father made building or putting something together. There is always some kind of building to be done in the open. Sometimes it's quiet. My mother knows this, too.

A Bright Distance

On the way to the corner store the other day you
didn't see my heart fade, and never mind the
nights you died in our bed, the nights when
my chest was opening between us, you didn't
notice my heart even then, unseeing you.

You've forgotten the night you came over
and couldn't find me anywhere. You undressed
and lingered. I was hidden and cold. You said, "Can we
be alright without common luxury?" I couldn't. I needed more
than a body for mine to touch. A heart, a little stone wonder.

Now, everything's slowed down and distant: new
words you say, the heat of it, etc. Before we were
here and I was unchanged and open, you never called.
I'm in a cold bed of my own. And you, too. But you're
different from me, I think. A wonder.

Then, with everything said, I keep you close.
I call you back, you, who never calls unless
it's evening in the city you home. We've been
here before, and we will probably be here again.
So long. The heart is simple and good.

But I don't wish for your leaving. I will secret you, die
in the middle of the bed, at the corner store again,
without anyone or anything, and you still won't see a heart
there or the double towers of my lungs. My heart
was never graying, though. I was, and remain so.

The Let Down

In the night she shuffles like a train
to the living room seven times at least.
Be patient; be kind – she's lost again,

can't find the bathroom, thinks her bed
is stuffed with feathers that make her itch.
I grow accustomed to telling her she

belongs to me, but we all disappear
eventually, apparitions flowing in
and out of that leak in her head. Today,

I'm the owner of this inn, or the cook, or
hostess. What good service there is here,
though my beds are too high. It must be

easier for her to criticize a stranger,
someone she's only just met. I'm pretending,
too. This isn't the occasional-cigarette Nanny

I used to know. We're both changing in
different directions. She's gotten shorter,
blames concrete floors, the high heels she wore

at the old lipstick factory. She blames her
forgetfulness on having to measure
by the thousandths of an inch.

I'm standing in the hallway watching
my grandfather forget. He looks
right through me, can't remember which

of his people I am after ten o'clock,
and the vodka tonic makes his arms
heavy. It's probably easier for him

to forget around someone he thinks
he never has to see again. I hold her elbow,
guide her back to her room. She

slips off her shoes and stands there like
a child ready for bed. I do not feel
older, this is not the reversing of roles

everyone talks about. She looks at me
with yellowing eyes. I lift her.
Even her swollen legs are weeping.

The Wake Up

Nanny sleeps in her year-round nightgown
swaddled in three layers of sheets, no teeth

in her wide-open mouth that trembles like
she'll wake up singing. It's my turn

to do the waking, the watching before the
two of us remember at once what we can't

remember, what we don't have fingers for, or
these things I've tried to tell her again

and again – *you are aged, you are sick, you
are mine*. But this is not the time for starting over.

Instead, I check her head for extra warmth, find
the tens of tissues she's hid under and inside

her pillow, watch the movement of her eyes under
and inside her tissue skin. Lately, she is older

than she thinks, trapped in her 70s she's
sleeping like a teenager these days, it's 11:00, it's

time to have her eat again, line up the pills like
planted flowers. *I'll have the pink one*, she'll say, thinking

she won't need to take them all. She seems so
different now. Maybe it's that I watch her more

carefully, watch my family do the same, her husband
and his eyes looking elsewhere. I remember her

early rises years ago, her set breakfast table

of coffee and Cheerios, her face already made, her

heels I could hear clicking from the bedroom, noises
my women make before 7:00, the silverware drawer, cans

of hairspray whispering their *hold-still*. She's still
and sleeping while I rub her shoulder, say

the name I call her over and over until she wakes.

Half-Light

My first taste of soap was in my grandmother's house;
always in trouble, I was always the one bubbling

at the mouth. I watched my grandmother clean,
her forearms bulging through the scrub, the same

tightness there when her sister told her she'd spent
most of her life in the half-light, the way one might

hide behind one love to wait for another,
the way she waited through one man

for a woman, for California, to be herself.
So often I'd confuse survival with cowardice,

her handling her sister's distaste for any woman
who might love another woman. I'm convinced

Aunt Nancy died with a bar of soap still
between her teeth, sticking out like a swollen

tongue, like mine, the fear of telling my grandmother
my taste in women, afraid of her instinct to clean

what she considers dirty. I'm afraid she's dead now
and knows all my secrets, who I've loved,

how I love, how I'll never keep that soap in my own house.

When We've Left the Table

In my family, we carry moons on the crests of our shoulders,
they get larger with age, bigger when we're old enough to lose.

I crush my instinct to return any pain in equal measure, to give back
something I've been given. There's too much beauty in having had.

It's easy to get so heart-trapped in the fauna of it. Me a deer, you
a deer, that a circle of matted grass, all of it in the understory.

You cannot say something with a gesture to a person for whom words
are everything. But I am still an animal, and so a gesture moves me, too.

Why is my reluctance to speak so washed with doubt. Hold my eyes
in one of your hands. Pick flowers at the base of their stems with the other.

I've been lost in the woods on my own before, but never was I left there. I've
crouched in waiting; it is so much harder with remembrance and return.

What does the other side of grief look like. Is it something
I'm ready to hold in my hands like water, or my mother's heart.

My moon's larger in this past year, tugging more at the very
back of me. The glow of it keeps me up. Maybe I'm no deer at all.

Second Thoughts on Existence

I saw my boy ghost running toward me in the street.
He was all wind and leaves, swirling, tiny tornado.

I'm picking out shoes in the women's size 8 aisle, my boy
ghost next to me. He ties one shoe while I tie the other.

I'm not who I used to be. Or, I'm forgetting what it was
to feel like I was always inside out.

There's a smell in my kitchen sometimes. It comes up
from the drain. It reminds me of my father's post-work hair.

Give a girl bangs to offset her broad shoulders. Correct
her tendency to sit with her legs wishbone-wide.

I would run up the stairs from my grandparent's basement
in the dark. Sometimes I heard a boy-laugh behind me.

My dog will only piss on monkey grass, the light wisp
on her stomach. She hikes her leg. Good boy.

Once, my grandfather said the gays shouldn't be allowed
to adopt children. Once, I kept my inside tucked away.

I'll muck around the earth forever in my hip-huggers.
Fists like a boxer. There's a line through me. Or, I am constant.

Once, someone told me they thought they weren't anything
special. Unexceptional. I am so tired of a bad self-portrait.

Can I tell you a secret? I have been an embarrassment.
It will probably happen again. I'll keep turning right side out.

Boy ghost turned when he recognized me, climbed up a small tree
in the closest yard. My dog barked, he disappeared.

Minister of Hearts

My grandmother kept plants year-round; some of them stay hanging in my eyes like a long sleep. One in particular made her the keeper of bleeding hearts – *dicentra spectabilis*, in the poppy family.

The bleeding heart plant has vines of small pink heart-shaped flowers, each with a small drop of blood dripping from the heart's downward tip. The bleeding heart plant should be surrounded by companion plants to thrive. It is poisonous.



My grandmother taught me that if you take apart a bleeding heart flower, inside are gifts – two rabbits, two slippers, two earrings, one bottle of perfume at the center. The bleeding heart is what you make of it. The bleeding heart is always waiting to be taken apart.



Earlier this year, the United Kingdom appointed a Minister of Loneliness. In the UK, loneliness is considered an epidemic, like a disease, like the flu during cold season. Mostly this is an issue for the elderly, those who have lost the one they've spent most of their lives with. It is so lonely to sift through shared memories with just one set of hands.



My grandmother never learned to cook from her mother. She was kicked out of the kitchen every time she tried to watch or learn. Her mother often left her home alone. She grew ulcers from that loneliness. She learned to cook later on her own.



In summer, the bleeding heart plant dies and withers to the ground. To care for the dying bleeding heart, dead foliage should be cut back. Do not cut the foliage before the plant turns yellow or brown; this is when the plant is storing food reserves for the next growing bleeding hearts.

The same goes for the broken heart. I won't check, pull back the tissue too soon. The broken heart will heal into something self-nurturing, something I don't recognize.



To have a bleeding heart is to be always vulnerable; some say dangerously tender. I've not found a way to harden myself, to live with an always-guarded little plant-heart. I don't think I want to.



My grandmother would make us sit in the kitchen with her and cut the ends off of green beans with a small paring knife, clean cuts. We'd sit with her on the back patio shucking corn until every strand of golden hair was pulled from the ear. She admired precision, taking care, having someone to sit with.



It's said that loneliness can cause arthritis, grinding of two parts where they shouldn't, pressure, swelling of the joints. Even the body expands, reaches outward, toward anything, in search of some relief.



My grandmother watched me learn how to stick up my middle finger – she told me hands were made for better things. Once, I used them to drown her hydrangeas, an accidental overwatering. I covered my body in mud from the scene I'd made. I'd taken something she cared for, killed a living thing.



If you prune a crepe myrtle too close to its trunk it won't be able to grow its limbs back. Some call it *crepe murder*, a killing. What's the word for cutting a girl down too close to her center?



It seems useful to surround yourself with other things that live, things to take care of. There's a need my grandmother had to tend to her belongings, care for them, the jewelry she wore on special occasions, the plants that kept her company. There are things we do to not feel so alone.



I've tried to argue with myself that I am not lonely. Most days, I'm not entirely convincing. What does the other side of the moon tell us other than something is likely what you think it is.

I've been in love once, with someone who couldn't love me back. I can't say yet that it's like this, or like that, or like anything – no metaphor comes to my hand like the others. It's not that I don't have the words to describe it; it's that I'm afraid I'll say it too loudly.



The broken heart has its own gifts. There is stillness there: the bitter rind of an orange, two shards of wine-bottle glass, a handful of petals at the center. The broken heart is fragrant, pumping, poisonous to the rest of the body.



Emily Dickinson describes "The Loneliness One dare not sound" as "The Horror not to be surveyed." She still had to write about it somehow. I suppose we all write about the things that keep us awake eventually.



It is said that loneliness is worse than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. I imagine loneliness could drive someone to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. I imagine loneliness kills a living thing faster.



I've loved someone I was building a house for who could not build a house for me. Loneliness can make a cruel little thing of any heart. Even the bleeding one.



An Attempt: Loneliness is a bad back. Loneliness is not being able to walk up the stairs to my front door – like no longer being able to call the person I love to help me get inside.

Another Attempt: The door to my house is in the center of a room in my childhood home. It is closed. On the other side is something I can feel a want for but cannot see.



Loving someone for the first time is whole-hearted joy. There is no hesitation. The heart bares all its gifts.

Once, I saw a small child jump off the back of a couch to the hardwood floor. She looked so betrayed by her own fearlessness when she landed on her head. We learn to fear through practice. We learn caution by not knowing fear in the first place.

Loving someone for every time after is something I don't yet know. Loving someone for every time after is something I imagine can never be like the first. The things we imagine can break our hearts, too.



Maybe the difference between loneliness and not wanting to be alone is the difference between being lonely and the fear of being lonely. If you don't leave, I'll never have to know. If I surround myself with living things, I'll never have to know.

I conflate loneliness and grief as much as I conflate happiness and contentment. The only difference is cause. It seems you cannot be happy without reason. It seems you cannot grieve without reason. It seems loneliness and contentment need no reason at all.



I think my neighbors have figured it out – good jobs, nice home, chickens, and a makeshift greenhouse in the backyard. The cure for loneliness must be the early-morning cluck of chickens.

My other neighbor lives alone with her two dogs and a flock of carrier pigeons she feeds in the afternoon. Another neighbor sweeps the street in front of her house with a small broom and dustpan every morning. There are many ways to be a living thing.



My grandmother made me a bleeding heart when I was young. Every year in September, she would buy three-dozen yellow roses for me to hand out to her neighbors for Good Neighbor Day. Many were in their eighties, widows, widowers. Some worked still in their yards or kitchens. Some still made enough coffee for two.



It is said that loneliness leads to a weakened immune system it is said that loneliness does not discriminate it is said that loneliness leads to a greater risk of cardiovascular disease it is said that loneliness leads to a greater risk of dementia it is said that loneliness leads to a greater risk of depression it is said that loneliness leads to a greater risk of anxiety the body is compromised there are failing hearts everywhere the brain tries to forget what it was like to be lonely.



My grandmother had a certain way of caring. She would go outside every spring or summer morning to pick the dead or dying flowers from her plants. She helped them do their living. She didn't want the buds to see what they'd become.

Assisted Living

Somewhere there is a tree or somewhere there
is a casket for my grandmother, somewhere
there is a fresh hole in the ground or some-
where there is a grave for the woman she
replaced, the woman she was waiting for,
the woman she is now, someone's waiting
for her to leave, for her bed, somewhere there's
a daughter staying home from work for her
mother, father, feeding and cleaning them,
she's waiting for their visit to be over,
for their care to come from somewhere else,
where she's not the one who takes their complaints,
not the one to watch herself turn invisible,
to wait for this disappearing act to end.

There's some kind of button everywhere to
call a nurse to take you to your room or
take you to the bathroom if that's what you
need, you are defined by your age and lucidity,
mobility and if you know your name, maybe
twice a day someone will ask if you need
something, the look in your eyes will say *yes*,
but you will not know the words for *please*
tell me where I am and how I got here,
you won't know how to wash yourself, feed
any part of your body with care, and that's okay,
someone's here to teach you, help you relearn
the ways of living, I've heard they're like other
memories, just waiting in the pocket of your brain.

Some other woman who's losing her mind
thinks the man she sees in the hallway walking
toward her is her husband, *there's my husband* she says,
and some other woman, his wife, sees the man,
hears this woman claim her husband as her
own and *no, that's my husband*, she says and she
remembered this today, her husband and
there are times when this happens and she knows, or
doesn't that they won't last long, soon she'll have only
one name rolling around in her little head,
next time she'll think he just looks familiar,
the way everyone here does, white hair, bent over –
posed like prophets looking at their shoes, like
they're all hiding their faces from someone's ghost.

He's eighty-seven, six-feet tall and too young
to hang out with the men who are bent
over to their boy-heights, using tennis-
ball walkers to muck around the parlor,
to go from room to room with a shuffle
and a moan, and he can walk with
his new-kneed step, can take himself over
to the bar behind the kitchen with ease,
pour himself a drink that reminds him where
he is and takes him some place else, the nights
at the local club, the mornings after that are not like
this morning where he sat at the table
with these old people, ate with them like they
were family, like they were already dead.

for Sharon

The last time I saw her, the last time I'll
ever see her, my name was Sharon, my dad's
name was Sharon, my sister, my mother,
Sharon, my Nanny couldn't say enough
about you, you were so gorgeous, the most
lovely woman around, Sharon, can you tell me
how you might have brushed her hair, told her
she was just stunning in her night gown, Sharon
I feel older in a new name, tired, never mind
Sharon, you don't have to tell me anything,
not how you washed her clothes, not how
you cleaned her room and made her bed, you
were the keeper, tender to her, Sharon,
I'll keep your name tucked safely in my palm.

We see a woman in the hallway on
our walk around the loop again, a giant
iris bruise across her face, blooming,
blots of yellow circling her eyes,
she had fallen at home, alone, she tried
to call me over with a hand on her chest,
like she has a secret to tell, some wisdom
I don't want to know yet, I keep walking
with my grandfather, listen to his feet brush
against the carpet, watch as he flirts
with the nurses, I hang on his joy
in having someone to talk to, I can't
look at the others, how visible their grief is,
how I don't want to hear it whispered in my ear.

There are alarms if you try to escape
out the side door that only looks like the
side door when really you might end up in
a garden that only looks like a garden,
there are ferns and tomatoes on their vines,
fixed benches, water features in the walls
and someone's surely planted your
favorite flower there, spend an hour there
until it's quiet, until you can't see
a face in the shrub to talk to, forget
everything you've known about loneliness,
that man playing solitaire every day until
he dies, here, you're not alone for long,
though everyone is so quickly leaving.

My mother never uses the word *if*
when she talks about the lottery, as if
she will eventually win it, as if
everyone in the world will get a turn,
I was twenty-three and still believed that
every baby is mailed one circus ticket
to use in her lifetime, what a thing I trusted
for far too long, my mother, her belief
in luck, her plain and simple knowing,
her way of living, thinking one day
she might scratch away enough of
the silver paper, but I still believe in
these things, her bets and wagers,
in motion, in birthdays, and her.

Take me to the backyard and assist me
there, take an axe to my old neck, remember
that I asked for death when I can't remember
my own hands, your name, or remember that
you asked for this, too, sister, take a bullet
to me, something quick, or not, I won't
remember anyway or I will remember
your favor, do me a kindness, sister,
take my shriveled brain and plant it elsewhere,
take my empty skull and make a vase,
take my name and write it in a garden,
crush my eyes into an herb of grace,
when my body's gone and words remain,
hold them in your palms to bury in the rain.

My grandmother's dipped in a tub by a woman whose
hands are gloved, that small sterile distance between
their hulls, how strange it must be to wash her,
some person she doesn't know, another
person she takes care of in a well-lit room,
behind a door, behind another door,
so private and not, if my grandmother
ever got wind of this she'd die right there
in the bath, in her open, her fingers pruned,
the woman watching her with hands to the sky,
my grandmother drowning, no, swimming
under the water, kicking the sides of the tub,
shrinking fish sized, fish don't need to be washed,
fish don't ever feel ashamed for swimming.

A woman I worked with told me I should
kill myself on my fiftieth birthday,
I packed cookies while she told me her life,
her hatred for men, for what they've done to her,
she was so sure she needed nothing from
anyone, I would wake to voicemails
in her midnight tone, telling me what life
I should live to survive the world alone,
to avoid the life she was living now,
she was the first person to tell me
that I'm the only thing I have to love,
she was sixty, busty, curly blonde hair,
living easy knowing she could be gone
at moment, by bus, by train, by her own hand.

The heart is perfect, beats when spoken to,
put your head close and listen to her, she's
pulling her weight, she knows her way around
an argument, I know my way around
a chest, how to feel for her there, sometimes
she's soft-spoken, sometimes she's her own
stereo, run static and gruff, lately
she reaches for my lungs, thinks them wise,
wants to know how they go on ceaselessly,
without any want to stop, how tired
one part becomes in empathy for another,
I want to know what's more perfect than
insistence, the body, understudy, how
one part works for another when it's failed.

Nanny's picked up in the same clothes she wore
when we left her last week, mossy hair matted
to her scalp, thinner now like her fingers,
how they curl around and rub her elbow, search for relief
there where her arm bones meet, where the women
hold her while they guide her to her room and
feed her medicines, or don't, watch her sing
for her hunger like a dog does when it
has no language for it – that treatment,
take with water if you remember where
the sink is in your lonely little room,
if you remember that you are a plant
yourself, who needs water, if you remember
that plants can be withered and living, too.

I wrote a poem this morning, poached it
in a bath on the stove, its letters rose up
to the water's surface, what am I doing
with recollection, chasing it with words
I've found like leaves on the bottoms of my
shoes, I'll make coffee from yesterday's grinds,
hush the dog and her suspicions, my own
I've simmered to a ring of salt, it's just
the company I miss, the waking up,
the walking around in this city we built,
its gardens, I know I can love more things
than poetry, that sustenance, I know
I can love only poetry, its bareness
at the center, its always wanting more.

To Be Good

I'm wading in the marina on the outside edge of our city,
the fish are so shy here, they kiss my feet like you used to,

I talk about us like it was years of my life, but that's how it is
to love in a bramble, every movement took such care, took

a year's time, even my hair turned moon-colored at the temples
overnight, at the peak where I last left the feeling of your palm,

its soft push telling me to stay still for once, lately I'm thinking
too much about stillness, my patience for this place is running thin,

I'm wading here wanting to be good, I want to stop talking
about this, I don't want to live in this city we made anymore,

I would swim but I am not feeling buoyant, there are twigs and
small pebbles wedged between my toes, there is a lock

of my hair floating in the water below me, to be good is only
what I make it out to be, I want only for my mouth and body

to never cause another mind or body to suffer, there is still
so much work to be done, so much push and carry, it's quiet here

and I am so sick of it, the silence of my thoughts haunting the gallery
of my head, I can't stand to look at something for too long,

I wish my brain a buoy, I wish my body built for care, I start
a dismantling, I avoid streets, places where we'd linger, places

that turn me mad, I've packed a bag every day since that morning,
come to the edge of the water, let it dampen my shoes only

to turn back, one day I'll find another word for *goodness*, one day
I'll leave for good, find some place where I won't remember

anything, that you never waited, that you never really left.

What Looks Like Losing It but Is Really Getting By

Could be your habit of pairing red wine and Benadryl,
nightly sleep-aid, medical mixology home-brew, or

maybe it's your tendency to think yourself too similar
to the ones you come from, maybe if you forget something

long enough, it never existed in the first place. You've
convinced yourself it's your lack of organization, tell yourself to

make a list of the things that you notice you forget, forget
to make the list because things turn up eventually, your mind

is a small thing after all, except humans have the heaviest brains
for our size, and so maybe your mind is weighing on you.

There's also the chance you're delirious, depressed, de-
hydrated. You wake up cotton-mouthed and can't find

the kitchen, find the milk's gone bad in the cabinet again.
You still remember your family, their names and birthdates,

your friends and the numbers that go with them. Sometimes
you wonder if you've forgotten the alphabet, mumble it

to the darkness above your bed, call your dog by your sister's
name and count to 98, 99, 100, answer some crossword clues

and lose the puzzle days later. Find solace in remembering
your license plate number on the spot, your mother's meatball

recipe like it's written on your tongue. Soon you'll
lose your old address, the names of the people you

taught yourself to love, how sorry you were and
you think about what your sister's face will look like

when she's seventy, when you finally forget her, when
you both decide to end each other, really, if you

remember the deal in time – kill me
when I don't recognize your face. But there's still

time now, and you'll live until you're eighty,
you think, *you'll live*.

Body Economy

The last time I shouldered up to my maker
to see how tall I've grown

my shoulders were wider than her hips,
the ones that thrust me into chill,
mid-morning air, and I'm still searching for
who to blame for this aching.

I've wondered if I was that lump
inside her breast, if it was me – that
burning sensation sticking in her veins,
the red medicine flowing
through her cold hands at therapy,
making her tired and sick
of the ice chips in her mouth.

I have caused my mother's pain and
she's caused mine with worry. We
are still alive with it, and I am still
sorry. Mother, let me tell you
again how I pain you,

how the turns in the Earth are the folds
in your brain and I am swimming,

I am the one trying to find that feeling
again, when we first met, before the war
inside your body took my name.

The Elbow Room

Everything neat where they last left it / the old bar / now a boneyard in the basement / ordered by all types of tacky glass / small green cars and little pink naked women / now covered in a dust too thick to clean / every bottle nearly touching its neighbor / schnapps and brandy, perfume and bath oils / scuffs on the floor near the knee-high sink / mini-fridge with decades-old club sodas / flat seltzers still waiting to be opened under this bar / where neighbors would gather / collect dust where they sat on the stools named after all the streets they lived on / Poppy on the floor sweeping sugar / some faint radio noise beneath the breathy gossip / Nanny props her chest on the counter / flirts with every man that takes a seat / for her, Pop always muddles something sweet / here's a toast to the secrets we all pocket / stealing little mouthfuls of gin / high-school friends who grew up on Sunday's leftover liquor / this is worth sharing one seat at the bar / worth knowing your neighbor's order / worth passing around manhattans just to try them / worth building a dive with your own hands and elbows / worth making room.

Happy Hour

Two years ago, I spent a week in my grandparents' empty house. It wasn't empty of their things – just them. It wasn't exactly empty of them – just their bodies. They were living down south with my aunt at the time. But the house was like the scene of an abduction; my grandmother's robe still hung on the bathroom door; my grandfather's small white hairs still stuck to the headrest of his recliner; there was still the feeling that someone was in the other room reading or mixing a cocktail.

*

A few months ago, my father told me about my grandmother's habits. I knew she loved to go out, to dance, to put on too much makeup, to smoke a little on the weekends. I knew she liked to be seen with her husband, to be on his arm. My father told me she had been on Valium for most of her life – since she was a child – for her anxiety. He told me that she would go out dancing and drinking still – didn't know she shouldn't drink on her medication. She wound up in the bathroom watching her head spin around in the mirror.

*

Among the things I found in the house were empty pill bottles, full pill bottles, the full bar downstairs that they used to entertain their friends. It was surrounded by vials of Avon perfume and drinking glasses. Everything was thick with dust by then. I sat alone at the bar. I looked to the space where they would dance. I pictured my grandmother spinning there. I pictured her hunched over the sink in her bathroom. I don't know how to picture her unworried.

*

Valium is known to cause paranoia, memory loss. When paired with alcohol it can cause slow breathing or even death. Many people use it or something similar to survive the life they're living, to make it through a day. Many people end up with other ailments they don't survive later on. My grandmother took it because she feared too much what other people thought of her. My grandmother was paranoid already. My grandmother's mind was gone before her body was.

*

There were things about my grandmother that I remembered while digging through the house. She had a lot of shame and so she had a lot of stuff to cover it – makeup, new shoes, tools for keeping up the yard. I hope there was a time when she didn't think about how someone else might see her. I hope there was a time when she was only out of breath from dancing late into the night.

*

There are different types of pills like there are different types of drinking – recreation, medication, survival. My father, like his parents, has always believed in the happy hour, its relief, its implied pleasure. My father likes to dance, too. He has a drink after work, a whiskey and water with the spherical ice cubes he likes to make. He turns his music up, dances while he cleans the house alone. He likes a ritual of his own making. Anything to avoid losing his own mind.

Body Economy

Hers fall out when she sleeps, the bottom
row rising up and resting on her lip,
a snarl while she snores in the lazyboy
like an animal with its belly to the sun.

All afternoon I've watched them ebb
and burrow in her lip – maybe beauty is really
some dirty thing I've known – a necessity,
the make-up, the flaws she filled

with plastic. Lately I've taken stock
of her body – her feet pointed out from
crooked hips that match my own, her
crooked walk to the bedroom in the evening.

So many things will change from cover
to expose. I've watched her clean her smile
in her hand, scrub the tarnish from her rings, all
while counting the teeth I still have with my tongue.

Gallery

How many times did I walk through the gallery of that apartment
looking at things kept from past lovers like heirlooms, I
rested my head there on the pillow someone else made,
how uneasy my head was on it, that remnant, have I become a remnant
among the things, jars, postcards kept in the drawer with me and the words
I said to you while we were in it, tell me how everything was kept
together, tell me how to keep my own collections,
how to keep them clean, they were all so clean and ordered, can I
say that I still miss even those things, can I say that I'm always
pacing a gallery of my own like some lost mystic, shrouded in the things
we left behind.

Muscle Memory

The day they told my grandfather that my grandmother died he was quiet, used his hands to try to make sense of the thing, he refolded his shirts in the drawer to her standard, folded the napkin next to his meal into the triangle shape she taught all of us growing up, in my family when the going gets tough, the tough go silent, we are a reflective kind, wonderers until it's time to say it aloud, look at how he sits there with his hands on his lap, his nails getting long in their worry, we cannot ask him yet what he's thinking because he cannot know yet what to think, he pulls his bed sheets tight to the corners of the mattress, he sorts out his morning pills in the order he takes them, lifts a trembling glass to his lips, watch how he does what he does every morning, I wonder if he moves differently in his body now, like how one moves differently in their body after someone else has touched them with sweet hands, like how a body moves with caution when it loses its head to grief, he takes a lap around the facility's hallway again, his hands grip the walker he pushes away like someone trying to hold him, he shouldn't have to talk about death or her, his hands say everything they mean to.

To, From

I wish I could tell you how I've loved you, too, like a bug.
Nanny, you can't say you've never wanted me like other women,

in better clothes, more makeup than your friends
on bingo night. I think I wanted that, too – women, other

things: hair that wouldn't move for dancing, glasses with
rhinestone chains. For so long, Nanny, I've been some other woman

wrapped inside me. It's been uncomfortable and safe.
There's a garden in my head, mid-blossoms, women, other

bulbs under the ground. There's so much color inside
and I have so much yet to do with it. I am another woman;

I am slowly moving from *this* to *that*, slowly
becoming. I'm sending you a letter to say I know women, others

you've loved the same as me, all of us in our Easter dresses
and patent-leather shoes, and I've wanted to tell other women,

I've wanted to tell you, Nanny, that I rose from plowed earth,
and I love all kinds of women, too.

Impressionism

Why couldn't I beg for what I wanted even then
when you left in the middle of the morning.

I'm still in some place I'm forced
to call my own. I'm surprised by your voice

on the phone; it's different
than my memory. My heart made me lose

my whole head that morning.

*

Is this what it's supposed to be –
you never coming back, my house

cleaner than ever. Is this the lesson
I was meant to learn: what heartbreak

could make of me – a clean house, a body
wanting its head and a hiding place.

*

Sometimes I'd lie down on my clean
floor. This body is nothing more

than a list of all the things I've put it through –
my struggling hips, the crooked history

of my spine.

*

There were times when I woke up feeling
absolutely headless; my hair, my ears, my temples gone.

I was heavy in the brain. It gathered so much

from the rest of the body. My thoughts were
just oil on canvas – brush strokes marking
the inside walls of my skull, nothing distinguishable,
something I stared at for hours in the hopes
of noticing anything new.

*

There were evenings where I'd wrap myself
inside another memory I'd visit and trash
like a hotel room somewhere I stayed too long,
outwore my welcome; bottles, clothes hanging
on the radiator in the corner.

*

Maybe one day when I'm old and you're
a little older, I'll meet you again in the middle
of our city, one where no other lovers live. I'll rifle
through my wallet for receipts and photographs;
I'll ask you to look at where I've been, what I
looked like then, show you a picture of a headless
girl, a face like mine – here is everything
I know, how it all works together, forms
a muddled painting of me at every age since I knew you,
since we started forgetting each other. Here
this is the life I have lived,
and I have loved you in it.

Self Portrait as a Secret

Lately I feel like I'm all eyes and ears, like I'm
waking up from a dream in which I'm with a lover again.

It's strange how my body will roll
toward anything, any mouth speaking a language I've known.

I've had a lover who
loved only reason,

a lover who knew too many places to hide:
in the laundry

in a glass of water
in the yard of my childhood home.

I hate these dreams and what they do to the morning after –
a split down the center.

I wish to learn the things a lover knows
that I cannot learn alone:

how to move in a body unfamiliar, how
to let something be.

Notes

“A Bright Distance” is a revised negative image of “This Dark Apartment” by James Schuyler.